When Your Long-Term Pastor Leaves Your Church
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Successfully Navigating a Unique Ministry Transition

Larry A. Gilpin
The time of transition following the tenure of a long-term pastor is a unique season in the life of a congregation. However, the distinct elements and potential difficulties of these transitions can be overcome—these transitions can work! Churches can navigate this season of ministry with the confidence that God can facilitate a successful transition process. *When Your Long-Term Pastor Leaves Your Church* describes, through a survey of biblical narratives as well as through more current real-life examples, the different ways churches go through transitions after a long-term pastor—with good, bad, or mixed results. The book then discusses ways a congregation, its pastors, elders, and pastoral search committee can safeguard against a poor transition and promote one that is successful. It provides practical guidance for churches who not only want to prevent a problematic transition after a long-term pastor, but want to actually promote one that works.
Appreciations

Larry Gilpin brings a wealth of pastoral experience with many examples to help churches understand issues that they will face during pastoral transitions. The time lines and checklists at the end of the book are particularly helpful for Search Committees seeking to understand and organize their responsibilities.

*Bryan Chapell, Grace Presbyterian Church (PCA), Peoria, Illinois President Emeritus, Covenant Theological Seminary*

Pastoral transitions are difficult even in the healthiest of churches. Larry has drawn from personal experience and research. But he also carefully studied the experience of three very different congregations transitioning from long term pastorates. Regardless of the circumstances, every congregational search committee and Session seeking a new pastor would greatly benefit from a thoughtful review of his work.

*Robert W. Burns, Assistant Pastor, Seven Hills Fellowship (PCA), Rome, Georgia; Adjunct Professor of Educational Ministries, Covenant Theological Seminary*

Love for the Bride of Christ demands gospel-centered transitions by pastors and local church leaders. Written by a journeyman pastor who has navigated the dangerous waters of several pastoral transitions, *When Your Long-Term Pastor Leaves*
Your Church is a must read for every search committee, ruling board, and pastor (because every pastor is a “departing pastor”). Not only can I recommend a book I have personally found helpful, I can commend Larry Gilpin as an author who is a dear friend whom I have watched practice what he preaches out of love for Jesus and by His grace.

George Robertson
Senior Pastor, First Presbyterian Church (PCA), Augusta, Georgia

I am delighted to recommend this well-researched work by Dr. Larry Gilpin on the church’s practice of healthy pastoral transition after a relatively long pastorate. My observation is that the majority of Search Committees choose the wrong successor and therefore he becomes an “Unintentional Interim” lasting no longer than four to seven years. In the process, great damage is inflicted upon the church—as well as on the pastor and his family. Dr. Gilpin provides invaluable counsel regarding general principles and effective procedures useful for finding a successor who will lead the church into many years of God-honoring ministry.

Philip D. Douglass, Professor of Applied Theology, Covenant Theological Seminary

This book will be a great resource to help churches going through a transition in leadership, especially when a long-serving pastor departs. The author wisely begins with biblical examples of leadership transition—Moses, Jesus, Paul and David. He then offers realistic case studies of churches which have gone through leadership transitions with varying degrees of success. Finally, the practical principles for all those affected by transition (incoming pastor, outgoing pastor, search com-
mittee, congregation, lay leadership) are helpfully summarized at the end of the book. I consider that this will be a very help-ful resource for our local church, which I helped to start over twenty-five years ago, as the people there deal with my immi-nent departure to a new ministry situation.

Jim Newheiser, Director of the Christian Counseling Program at Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, North Carolina; Executive Director of IBCD
Dedication

To Corley: Thank you for faithfully modeling the love, grace, compassion, and commitment of Jesus to me and our family.

 Truly, “You excel them all.” (Proverbs 31:29)
Acknowledgments

Even with a relatively short book, there are numerous people to thank. No book ever gets written or published merely by one’s own efforts. So, I offer my sincere thanks: to Bob Burns, who first recommended I write this book. To my sister, Betsy, both for her consistent encouragement and her initial editing. To Jim Holmes, for his great support and editorial work. This project would not have happened without your involvement—thank you for helping me see that it was actually possible. To my mother-in-law, Annette, who prays faithfully for my ministry. To the Fellowship Presbyterian Church in Newport, Tennessee, the Monroeville Presbyterian Church in Monroeville, Alabama, and the Westminster Presbyterian Church in Martinez, Georgia, for allowing me to be your pastor. To the many friends who have taken an interest in this project and have asked about its progress. To my wife, Corley, and my daughters, Emily and Lauren—for loving me and for making home and family a place of refuge and enjoyment for me. And to the God of all grace—that He truly loves me in Christ and is for me both in life and ministry. May He use this book to bless His church. To Him be the glory!
A Note about Terms

This book is written with my background and church association being a Presbyterian one. Some of the terms used are fairly distinctive to my church affiliation—such as “Session” (the local governing body of elders in a Presbyterian church), “Diaconate” (the body of deacons in a Presbyterian church) and “Presbytery” (the regional governing body of ministers and congregations in a Presbyterian church). In addition, some of the processes for selecting a pastor are distinctive to my own affiliation. However, I believe readers from any church, whatever its form of government or specific means of securing a pastor may be, will benefit from considering the biblical concepts and the issues related to transitions addressed in this book.

Also, the focus of this book is on transitions after a long-term pastor. However, the material can be useful for any pastoral transition—whether it occurs after many years or after a relatively brief pastoral tenure. Any pastoral transition is a time of great significance in a congregation. I believe the principles set forth in this book will help churches face that season of ministry with greater clarity and insight.
Pastoral Transitions:

Times of Ecstasy or Agony?
Michael served as pastor of Gracewood Presbyterian Church for almost fifteen years. His tenure was the longest ever at the church and was marked by consistent, though not spectacular, growth in numbers. His congregation appreciated his preaching, pastoral skills, and the steadiness he provided. He and his elders occasionally disagreed on issues facing the congregation. However, this did not hinder his faithfulness in ministry to the church, nor the mutual love he and his elders had for one another. He resigned to accept a call to a congregation in another state that had been through a time of deep conflict, believing his pastoral skills were needed there.

He was replaced by Robert, who was fourteen years younger than his predecessor and is now in his ninth year of ministry at Gracewood. Previously, Robert was an assistant pastor for four years at a much larger congregation. Gracewood is his first solo pastorate. Due to needs and available funds as a result of increased numerical growth over the past four years, Gracewood has built a new fellowship hall and educational wing. Though Robert was young when he came to the church, even the older members have related well to him and have enjoyed their interaction with him, his wife, and their young children. And although the congregation has a quiet apprehension that Robert will one day be called to a larger church, for the moment its members are enjoying his ministry and hope it continues.

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Al was the senior pastor of Rivermont Presbyterian Church for just over ten years. During his tenure, the church grew in
members and staff and financial giving was consistently high. He was loved deeply by his congregation and highly respected in his community. He could state his understanding of Scripture on the most controversial topics in a very personable way. Even those in the church who sometimes disagreed with him still were supportive of his ministry and enjoyed being around him. He was, in many ways, the quintessential pastor-teacher.

His congregation was heartbroken when he announced he was resigning to become pastor of a different church in another part of the country. One observer said “everyone cried” on his last Sunday. After he was gone, a pastoral search committee was formed, and its members began to look for Al’s replacement. The committee did not take a long time to complete its work. Six months later it recommended Dave, a man slightly younger than Al, and the congregation called him as its new pastor. Though Dave had strengths, he was somewhat hard to get to know, and some staff members found it difficult to work with him. During the first six months of his tenure, two key staff persons began looking for other positions. In addition, in the terms of one elder, he “ran off” a third staff member. Relational problems with staff, officers, and other members of the congregation continued throughout his tenure. After two years he was asked by his Session (the leadership group for churches in his denomination) to begin seeking another place of ministry. He resigned about a month after this request.

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Ray was fifty-four years old when he was called as pastor of Springdale Presbyterian Church and stayed until his retire-
ment eleven years later. He came to the church after the founding pastor left. His tenure was marked by relative peace in the church, though not by high levels of numerical growth. His members thought he balanced his teaching-preaching and “people” responsibilities well. He was succeeded by Jeff, a forty-year-old man with about fourteen years of ministry experience. He has been at Springdale now for two years. Many people feel the transition went well and that the change was mostly positive. Jeff has made some changes which have annoyed some elders but which have been well received by others. Some members of the congregation have left the church, unhappy with the “new direction” under Jeff. Yet, others feel they have grown spiritually in ways they have never grown before, and they give credit for this to Jeff’s sound teaching. Those who support him—actually a solid majority of the congregation—are very strong in their support and would be disappointed if he were to leave. Yet, a small minority of members would not be terribly disappointed if he were to move on.

While these three scenarios aren’t direct accounts of specific pastoral transitions, they are representative of typical events that occur when a long-term pastor leaves his congregation. Sometimes that transition goes well; sometimes it goes quite poorly; at other times the results are mixed.

The Elephant
Pastoral placement has been described as “matchmaking” that can be “an ecstasy of opportunity or an agony of decision.” Transitions from one pastor to another also have been referred to as “the elephant in the boardroom”—something big and threatening—which people pretend isn’t there or don’t want to
talk about. Yet if people don’t talk—in advance of, during and after—about these transitions, the church suffers. The reality is that every pastor is a departing pastor—and churches need to prepare for the inevitable and eventual time of transition they will face.

**Maintaining Biblical Priorities**

Yet, mere preparation is not enough—we need to think and act biblically amid these transitions. We see the preparation for leadership transition in Acts 20, where Paul addressed the elders in Ephesus as he was about to depart from them. He emphasized the biblical pastoral priorities of public and private ministry (v. 20) and of proclaiming the entirety of God’s word (v. 27). He emphasized the responsibility of elders to guard the spiritual welfare of God’s people (v. 28) and set forth the sufficiency of the Lord and His word—to which Paul entrusted for safekeeping those who had been under his care (v. 32). Good transitions in pastoral leadership are not simply a matter of following human wisdom, but involve a dependence on the grace of God and a biblically shaped approach to the ministry of Christ’s church.

**What Makes Long-Term Transitions Unusual?**

Yet, as we pursue biblical priorities, we need to understand our ministry context, and the context of replacing long-term pastor has unique dynamics. First of all, transitions after a long-term pastor are unusual, whether the pastor leaves amid amicable conditions or in the midst of circumstances that have been more tumultuous. A long-term pastorate itself isn’t common in contemporary American churches, where pastoral transitions occur frequently. The average pastor in America
has served in his pastorate for five years. In my own denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), the average pastoral stay as a solo or senior pastor is seven and one-third years. So the transition from a long-term pastor who has served at least ten years to his successor provides a much more unusual situation for a congregation. The figure of ten years, though admittedly arbitrary, is a realistic figure for defining a long-term pastorate in the PCA, since the average pastoral tenure in the denomination is just over seven years.

**Lots of Variables**

In addition, a church’s process of pastoral transition after a relatively long pastorate involves a lot of variables including the personalities, spiritual gifts, and leadership styles of the former pastor and the successor pastor; the expectations or desires of the leadership of the congregation regarding the successor pastor; the grounds for congregational “acceptance” of the successor pastor; the quality of relationships the former pastor had with members of the congregation; and the goals of the successor pastor for the congregation and the manner in which he pursues them. Certainly these factors can be present in any pastoral transition, but their weight may be increased when a pastor has had a relatively long tenure and is being succeeded by someone new.

In these unique circumstances for a pastoral transition, what makes the difference in the ultimate results? Do things just happen with little explanation, or are there particular factors or dynamics in a transition scenario that contribute to the success or lack of success of the transition? In particular, can a congregation, its elders and its pastoral search committee, engage in a
specific course of action to safeguard against a poor transition and to promote one that is successful? The answer is “yes!” The more important issue is, “How can it happen?” First of all, as churches seek to promote a healthy transition, they can be helped by looking at some of the leadership transitions the Bible describes.
Practical Questions for Consideration

1. What are some personal qualities that make your long-term pastor unique and appreciated by your congregation?

2. What are the ministry areas in which your long-term pastor is clearly gifted? What are areas of ministry in which he is not particularly strong?

3. What are some dynamics or variables that you see in your own congregation that could make a transition after your long-term pastor difficult?

4. Are there persons in your congregation who have experience in a pastoral search (whether it occurred in your congregation or somewhere else)?
The successor pastor needs to possess those ministry strengths of the predecessor which have helped define the ministerial character and approach of the congregation. A congregation can benefit from a new pastor who possesses ministerial gifts which the previous pastor did not have. However, the search committee should investigate whether he exercises those gifts in humility, in submission to his fellow elders, and in pursuit of the edification of the body of Christ.

(7) Don’t Rush—Be Patient
While it’s entirely possible that the search process will be finished relatively quickly and the right man will be called, it’s also quite possible that the process will take a considerable length of time. The failure of a search committee to quickly locate a candidate to recommend is not an indication that the committee is failing to do its job. A period of vacancy can actually be God’s gift to a congregation. Rushed or pressured decisions are not typically going to be good ones. Sessions as well as congregations can serve search committees well by allowing them to do what they have been charged to do, even if it takes what seems to be a long time. Quality of fit for the new pastor—rather than speed of the search process—should be the desire of the church.

(8) Congregations: Be Realistic in Expectations
Some people will probably leave the church after the pastor leaves—expect it. However, you can also expect that new people will come to the church under the ministry of the new pastor. Also, once the new pastor arrives, members should ask
themselves whether they have realistic expectations of him. For example, the new pastor won’t know all his members’ names when he begins his ministry. He will be different from his predecessor in his temperament, in his mix of spiritual gifts, and in his ministry emphases. If members will allow him to be who God has constituted and gifted him to be, give him an opportunity to minister, and seek to minister with him and to him and his family, it’s quite possible that his ministry will be fruitful and long in duration.

(9) Pastors: Honor Each Other
The attitudes of the predecessor and successor pastor are key to a good transition. A humble willingness to honor one’s predecessor will help to provide a pastor a good beginning in his new place of ministry. This helps to build up “relational capital” with his church’s members and potentially attain a degree of longevity in the congregation. Also, former pastors should not tolerate other people speaking negatively to him about his successor. Be your successor’s cheerleader with the congregation.

(10) Remember: Transitions Really Can Go Well!
Conventional wisdom often says otherwise—but transitions are not doomed to failure, even if a popular, long-term pastor is being replaced. Pastoral transitions are hard, but Jesus cares for His church and knows its needs. We can trust Him, His plans for His people, and His presence with us.
About the Author

Larry Gilpin has served as a PCA minister for thirty years with pastorates in Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia—where he helped prepare his congregation for his departure as a long-term pastor. He has served his current presbytery as its moderator, as chairman of its candidates and credentials committee, and as a member of its shepherding committee, where he assists ministers and congregations dealing with difficult seasons of ministry. He has a heart for mentoring younger ministers, shepherding other pastors, and assisting churches as they deal with pastoral transitions. He is a graduate of Covenant Seminary (M.Div., 1986, D.Min., 2006), where his doctoral dissertation focused on the process of pastoral transitions following the tenure of a long-term pastor. He and his wife, Corley, have been married since 1987 and have two adult daughters.